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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: HCMC PASTORS: CHRISTMAS CELEBRATED WITHOUT

GOVERNMENT INTERFERENCE

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Despite a stream of reports from U.S. sources proclaiming a new "crackdown" on Protestant worshippers in the Central Highlands and elsewhere in Vietnam over the Christmas holidays, conversations with well-connected pastors in HCMC over the past weeks revealed surprisingly few allegations of even harassment by the government. Instead, the pastors talked of growing numbers of worshippers, new churches, and expansion of religious training programs both here and abroad. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) During a dinner with several local religious leaders from various Protestant denominations, none of these pastors polled by Poloff was aware of any specific instances of arrests, beatings, or interference with worship services over the holidays. All said they were able to celebrate the holidays with their own congregations without incident, and believed that others outside of HCMC had done so as well. They spoke of hundreds of religious leaders currently undergoing training here and overseas.

¶3. (SBU) One ethnic minority congregation leader did complain of police searching his home and questioning him just that morning. However, he believed the incident to be connected with a November trip to Tien Giang province, when he was intercepted outside a "church" and detained briefly, before being told to return to HCMC. The authorities then disbanded the assembled worshippers and confiscated a variety of religious and secular items.

¶4. (SBU) In a separate, unrelated meeting, three Mennonite pastors responded that they had not heard of any specific examples of interference with Christmas services, but said they might still receive additional information from the provinces. The pastors promised to arrange for direct meetings with sources from the Central Highlands in the future, rather than act as middlemen. The pastors said the Mennonites had recently sent religious workers to Gia Lai and Dak Lak provinces to try to "rally" hundreds of house churches that had "become scattered" over the past five months. Ethnic minority religious leaders, however, "seemed scared." Because this five-month time period would coincide with reports of arrests in the Central Highlands during August-September 2002, Poloff pressed for details. The pastors, however, described the general climate of harassment faced by all unregistered house churches.

¶5. (SBU) The Mennonite pastors did provide Post with news of the December 27 arrest of a missionary near HCMC, but no details on why he was arrested. Photographs show dozens of people gathered around a police vehicle as uniformed officers take the missionary into custody. Later photographs purport to show the missionary after he was returned from custody beaten and unconscious. The photos depict him lying on the floor, with one of the pastors standing over him with a clearly marked first aid kit. The missionary has since recovered, according to the pastor. (Post note: To the untrained eye at least, the police in the photos do not appear to be using excessive force. Poloff will try to follow up with the missionary directly.)

¶6. (SBU) One of the pastors also provided photographic evidence of a police search of his home in December. These photographs show uniformed police officers asking questions and taking notes. The pastor believes this incident might have been related to his failed attempt to register as the legal representative for three relatives of Father Ly, who were detained in June 2001. (Post note: Father Ly, who was sentenced to a total of 15 years imprisonment for "damaging national unity" in October 2001, remains a controversial figure even within the Catholic Church here.) The same pastor also mentioned that he was working toward opening a training center on law and human rights.

¶7. (SBU) According to the three Mennonite pastors, the GVN continues to "watch and prohibit." They claimed that two other pastors who had returned from training in Thailand late last year were apprehended by police and injected with poison. The two had subsequently "lost their memories" and are currently under the care of their followers, being no longer able to fulfill their pastoral duties. (Post note: Post will attempt to verify this story, as the pastors

acknowledged they were giving Poloff a second/third-hand account.) In an aside, the pastors said that "local governments" in the Central Highlands had "opposed and threatened" Deputy Prime Minister Dung during a recent visit there.

18. (SBU) The pastors had no statistics for what they proudly described as a steadily growing number of worshippers, but said there are 1500 Mennonite house churches throughout the country. The pastors are also attempting to revive a Christian Boy Scout program in Vietnam. This program would be independent of any umbrella organization, and, presumably, unrecognized here. The pastors are close to naming 12 troop leaders, including five who had served in that capacity before the organization was disbanded in 1975. They cited great interest among members of the Christian community.

19. (SBU) Comment: Post accepts that much of this information is anecdotal. The fact that some have been able to worship peacefully does not mean all enjoy the same opportunity, which is why we do not generalize about religious practice in the Central Highlands. Still, it is noteworthy that none of these religious leaders (who have been consistent sources of information critical of GVN human rights violations in the past) complained of government repression over the holidays. This does not preclude the possibility that additional information may surface later, but offers a counterpoint to some of the more inflammatory charges generated by other sources.

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